

Examining the Usefulness of an ESP Textbook for Information Technology: Learner Perspectives

Authors : Yun-Husan Huang

Abstract : Many English for Specific Purposes (ESP) textbooks are distributed globally as the content development is often obliged to compromise between commercial and pedagogical demands. Therefore, the issue of regional application and usefulness of globally published ESP textbooks has received much debate. For ESP instructors, textbook selection is definitely a priority consideration for curriculum design. An appropriate ESP textbook can facilitate teaching and learning, while an inappropriate one may cause a disaster for both teachers and students. This study aims to investigate the regional application and usefulness of an ESP textbook for information technology (IT). Participants were 51 sophomores majoring in Applied Informatics and Multimedia at a university in Taiwan. As they were non-English majors, their English proficiency was mostly at elementary and elementary-to-intermediate levels. This course was offered for two semesters. The textbook selected was *Oxford English for Information Technology*. At class end, the students were required to complete a survey comprising five choices of *Very Easy, Easy, Neutral, Difficult, and Very Difficult* for each item. Based on the content design of the textbook, the survey investigated how the students viewed the difficulty of grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing materials of the textbook. In terms of difficulty, results reveal that only 22% of them found the grammar section difficult and very difficult. For listening, 71% responded difficult and very difficult. For general reading, 55% responded difficult and very difficult. For speaking, 56% responded difficult and very difficult. For writing, 78% responded difficult and very difficult. For advanced reading, 90% reported difficult and very difficult. These results indicate that, except the grammar section, more than half of the students found the textbook contents difficult in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing materials. Such contradictory results between the easy grammar section and the difficult four language skills sections imply that the textbook designers do not well understand the English learning background of regional ESP learners. For the participants, the learning contents of the grammar section were the general grammar level of junior high school, while the learning contents of the four language skills sections were more of the levels of college English majors. Implications from the findings are obtained for instructors and textbook designers. First of all, existing ESP textbooks for IT are few and thus textbook selections for instructors are insufficient. Second, existing globally published textbooks for IT cannot be applied to learners of all English proficiency levels, especially the low level. With limited textbook selections, third, instructors should modify the selected textbook contents or supplement extra ESP materials to meet the proficiency level of target learners. Fourth, local ESP publishers should collaborate with local ESP instructors who understand best the learning background of their students in order to develop appropriate ESP textbooks for local learners. Even though the instructor reduced learning contents and simplified tests in curriculum design, in conclusion, the students still found difficult. This implies that in addition to the instructor's professional experience, there is a need to understand the usefulness of the textbook from learner perspectives.

Keywords : ESP textbooks, ESP materials, ESP textbook design, learner perspectives on ESP textbooks

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